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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [CU](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: DISSIDENTS: UN MEETING SHOWS CUBAN GOVERNMENT'S
ABILITY TO MANIPULATE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Classified By: COM: Jonathan Farrar: For reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (C) Summary: Several leading dissidents commented that the GOC successfully used its good relations with nations in the developing world to minimize criticism during the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council held on February 5 in Geneva. The official Cuban press reported that Cuba received wide support in the council and that the vast majority of countries who spoke at the meeting praised Cuba. However, the GOC also sent out an official statement castigating the Western press for distorting the results of the meeting by dwelling on criticisms from Israel and other Western nations. Leading dissidents said that the GOC was so confident of the support of its allies, that it had no compunctions about making totally false statements during the Council meeting about freedom of expression and freedom of movement in Cuba. The dissidents do not believe that the recommendations of the Council will substantially improve the human rights situation in Cuba. Nevertheless, the dissidents thought that it is a positive development that the GOC engage in international forums on human rights and be concerned about its international image. Dissidents feel that any reforms the GOC is compelled to make, even if only to placate international opinion, are still welcome. The dissidents said that the strength of the GOC's propaganda machine will not deter them from continuing to inform the global community about the dire state of human rights in Cuba. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On Feb. 6, the official Cuban newspapers Granma and Juventud Rebelde both proclaimed that Cuba had received broad support and praise from 51 countries that spoke at the meeting of the Human Rights Council. The articles cited praise given Cuba for success in advancing equality and fighting discrimination, as well as for the assistance it provides to other developing countries. Reacting to the more substantive recommendations of some countries, on February 10, the government issued a strongly worded official statement from Vice Minister of Foreign Relations, Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, stating that the Western media had manipulated the news from Geneva by focusing on the criticisms of 9 countries, while "hiding the fact" that 51 countries "recognized Cuba's notable advances in the field of human rights". Most of the offending articles of the Western media led off with the fact that the Cuban government refused a recommendation for the release of political prisoners. The Cuban press has not reported any of the statements criticizing GOC's human rights record nor has it specified

what recommendations had been made at the meeting. Rodriguez further stated that the Geneva meeting had removed the pretext for the US embargo, explaining that first the US justified the embargo because of nationalizations of American businesses, then with the Soviet threat, then the exportation of the Revolution, then the Cuba military presence in Africa, and now it cites supposed violations of human rights, which Rodriguez said now has been taken off the table by the HRC.

13. (C) In comments to USINT officers following the HRC presentation, dissident economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe stated that the Cuba government was very skilled at lining up allies for the Council meeting. He stated that the report submitted by Cuba to the Council showed "a complete lack of respect for any intelligent person". He said that it was astounding to see the figure of two hundred "NGO's" that the GOC had "consulted" in preparing the report. He said that most of the "NGO's" either don't exist or are controlled by the GOC. He commented that, even if it was only in passing, it was heartening to hear Latin American countries such as Mexico, Brazil and Chile mention issues of major concern to Cubans such as freedom of movement, and prison conditions. He stated that the Minister of Justice, Maria Esther Reus, gave a very polished performance, especially since she without blinking an eye was able to make such complete misrepresentations of fact as that there is freedom of movement for Cubans and there is freedom of expression in Cuba. Espinosa Chepe said he doubts any of the recommendations accepted by the government of Cuba will result in any substantive improvements for human rights on the island. However, as did other dissidents Pol/off met

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with, Espinosa Chepe thought that it was a positive development that Cuba felt some pressure to improve its international image.

14. (C) Dissident lawyer Rene Gomez Manzano said that he is in the process of examining the recommendations of the Council that the GOV either accepted or stated that they would continue to study. Of the 80 recommendations made at the council meeting, the GOC accepted 60, held 17 for further study and refused three. Gomez stated that several are simply boilerplate from developing countries that Cuba share "best practices" in health and education. Others that involve changes in law or procedure, the government can probably manage to implement without any substantive changes to the system. He stated that, for example, the GOC could establish an office of an ombudsman and ensure that the office had no genuine power. He also said that Cuba could agree to changes in the law, but the government has many ways to accomplish the same goals. He cited the example of Italy's recommendation to reduce the number of offenses subject to the death penalty. He said that the GOC could reduce the 15 offenses that now carry a potential death sentence to 3 and still easily convict anyone it feels warrants capital punishment. He said that Cuba is expert at buying off criticism. Gomez, too, believes that in the long run, it is a positive development that Cuba feels some pressure to polish up its image in international forums.

15. (C) Elizardo Sanchez of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN) said he thought there would be little impact from the meeting in Geneva, but that it did open the door for further scrutiny of the human rights situation that could spin out of control by the GOC. He stated that although the GOC has a keen sense of how to stage manage official visits, past experience shows that events sometimes proceed in an unanticipated manner. He said that it will be interesting to see if Cuba agrees to recommendations for a visit from the International Red Cross. His sources indicated that after the last visit by the Red Cross in 1989, despite the GOC's extensive efforts to guide the visits of the delegates, Fidel Castro was furious to see in the final confidential report a lengthy description of

serious problems in the prison system. He said that likewise the last visit in 1988 of the former UN Human Rights Commission, which was packed with Soviet bloc and third world sympathizers of the regime, proved to be a public relations disaster when hundreds of people lined up around the hotel where the Commission members were staying, but were able to speak to them about human rights abuses. Sanchez is sure that the GOC thinks Geneva was a foreign relations triumph. He, however, said he believes that the results will not discourage activists in Cuba, and that they will increase their efforts to publicize the actual situation on the island. Prisoners have told Sanchez's organizations that in several prisons within the last two weeks authorities have been doing painting and repairs as well as establishing new educational classes. In addition, authorities are preparing a site in Sancti Spiritus to serve as a model prison. Sanchez feels that these improvements are likely to be cosmetic and done only to impress foreign delegations. However, it has been a long time since the GOC has done anything at all to improve the appalling conditions in the nation's prisons. Sanchez said he has already contacted Manfred Nowak, the UN Special Rapporteur for Torture, and is seeking to provide him with detailed, verifiable information about cases of systematic brutality and degrading treatment inflicted on prisoners. Sanchez said that dissidents never underestimate the capacity of the Cuba government's propaganda machine, but the fact that the Cuba government allows any scrutiny by the international community will give increased motivation to their attempts to expose the abuses in Cuba.

16. (C) Comment: Our dissident contacts were disappointed but not surprised by the GOC's ability to manipulate the HRC proceedings. But as Cubans are wont to do, they are looking at ways to make the best of a bad situation. We agree with them that, for all of its faults, the HRC periodic review chipped away some of the facade the GOC puts up for world

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consumption.
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